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ABSTRACT

Teachers from countries outside the United States who plan to spend time in U.S. schools might find this document beneficial. It includes a brief examination of the structure of U.S. secondary education, patterns of life, and work in a typical U.S. secondary school, and relationships among various groups of persons within secondary schools. Three key issues in U.S. public education are discussed against this introductory background: (1) progressivism versus traditionalism; (2) homogeneous versus hetrogeneous grouping; and (3) local versus state financing of school costs. The document also contains a 15-item summary of important features of U.S. secondary education; a 29-item glossary of common terms in secondary education; and a graphic depicting optional paths of student advancement through the U.S. educational system (pre-school through grade 12). (DB)

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SECONDARY EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

AN OVERVIEW FOR EDUCATORS FROM ABROAD

Cornelius Grove

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Council on International Educational Exchange

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This article is an outgrowth of the Council on International Educational Exchange's longstanding involvement in the administration of U.S.-based programs of in-service training for non-American secondary school teachers. It has been prepared for overseas teachers who plan to spend time in U.S. schools on CIEE-sponsored or other programs. The article includes a basic introduction to the structure of American secondary education, as well as a discussion of the significant cultural values that underlie this system and give rise to some of its dilemmas and issues.

The author, Cornelius Grove, directed the AFS Center for the Study of Intercultural Learning from 1978 to 1989 and is now president of his own intercultural relations consulting firm in Brooklyn, New York. He has given workshops, seminars, and university courses dealing with intercultural awareness and cultural issues in education in North America, Europe, and Asia. He is the author of the *Orientation Handbook for Youth Exchange Programs* (1989) and coauthor of *Interacting with Chinese from the PRC: A Handbook for Americans* (1991), both published by Intercultural Press of Yarmouth, Maine.

SECONDARY EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES: AN OVERVIEW FOR EDUCATORS FROM ABROAD

by Cornelius Grove, Ed.D.

Your first impression of secondary schools in the United States may be that they are quite similar to secondary schools in your home nation. But in several important ways, schools in the United States are different from schools in almost all other countries.

ADMINISTRATION OF PUBLIC EDUCATION IN THE U.S.

The Role of the National Government: State-supported schools in your home nation probably are administered by one of the ministries of your central government. You may think that the U.S. Department of Education (located in Washington, D.C.) performs the same function as the ministry of education in your home nation. But it does not.

The U.S. Department of Education has two functions. It enforces federal laws guaranteeing that all students in state-supported (or "public") schools in the U.S. have equal access to a good education. And it makes certain types of financial and technical assistance available to public schools. The Department of Education does not administer schools because the U.S. Constitution, which specifies the powers of the national (or "federal") government, does not mention education. The writers of the Constitution wanted many governmental responsibilities to be controlled by regional or local authorities. Education is one of those responsibilities.

The Role of the Fifty State Governments: Final responsibility for public education in the United States belongs to the governments of the 50 states. In each state, that responsibility belongs to a state board of education, a small group of prominent citizens. In most states, board members are appointed to a term of several years by the state governor. The board members' policy-making and supervisory authority covers all public elementary and secondary schools. Church-supported (or "parochial") and independent (or "private") schools, which educate about 12.4 percent of the elementary and secondary students in the United States, are largely free from the authority of state boards of education in their respective states.

One of the principal functions of a state board of education is to set minimum standards for public schools within the state. Minimum standards concern, for example, the length of the school day and year, teachers' salary levels, topics to be covered in the curriculum, and requirements for graduation. The state board also certifies teachers.

Another function of a state board is selecting the top educational administrator in the state, usually known as the "commissioner" or "state superintendent" of education. He or she is responsible for advising board members and for supervising employees of the state department of education, who implement the policies of the state board and provide financial and technical assistance to public schools within the state.

The state boards and state departments of education, however, do not administer schools. In all but one state (Hawaii), they delegate responsibility for operating schools to local boards of education.

The Role of Local Boards of Education: There are roughly 15,700 local boards of education in the United States; each administers the public elementary and secondary schools of a local area. The six to 12 members of a local board (sometimes called "school committee") are elected to terms of several years by the citizens of that area. Local boards are policy-making bodies of citizens; each hires a professional school administrator, the "superintendent of schools," to direct the day-to-day activities of the local public schools. Local boards are units of government with power to levy taxes on property (real estate).

A local board and its superintendent are free to make decisions about many matters affecting students, faculty and staff members, and curricula. Since 15,700 local boards are making decisions, there is much variety in educational policy and practice in the United States. But a local board does not have complete freedom. It must abide by the minimum standards set by its state board of education and respect the laws of the nation regarding equal educational opportunity.

Cultural Values Underlying Local Control of Schools: The United States was founded by colonists who had developed a strong dislike of any centralized government that controlled things from far away, in this case the British king and Parliament. The colonists believed that as many governmental decisions as possible should be made locally and democratically (by people voting). Today, many governmental functions in the U.S. are handled locally, and many more are handled at the state level. Education provides an excellent example. Schools are operated locally; educational policy is set locally by a group of elected citizens; standards are set by another group of citizens at the state level. The federal government plays almost no role at all in the operation of schools.

PATTERNS OF LIFE AND WORK IN A TYPICAL U.S. SECONDARY SCHOOL

What U.S. Secondary Schools Include: Schooling in the U.S. lasts twelve years. Nowadays, the most common pattern is six years of elementary school (almost always preceded by at least one year of "kindergarten"), then six years of secondary school divided between three years in "junior high school" and three years in "high school." Other patterns are easy to find; one is four years of elementary school, four years of "middle school," and four years of high school. This discussion will focus on high schools (for students aged 15–18).

Faculty and Administration Responsibilities: Each high school is led by a principal, who is responsible to the local superintendent of schools. Most high schools are quite large (many with 1000 or more students), so they usually have one or more assistant principals. Faculty members are organized into departments based on subject specialties such as mathematics, English, art and music, physical education, and others. Each department is headed by a chairperson. Guidance counselors also work in virtually every school; they are professionals trained in psychology or social work who advise students about their academic program and plans for the future, and sometimes about their personal problems. Other employees of the school include secretaries, cafeteria personnel, librarians, custodians, and so on.

A Typical Day in a High School: In other countries, students are typically organized into groups of 25 to 50 that stay together for most of their classes; each group might remain in the same room most of the day, to be taught by one teacher after another. If this is how students in your home nation go about their daily routine, you will find any U.S. high school to be utterly chaotic and bewildering.

Each American high school student has an individual schedule of classes for each day. It is rare to find two students in the same school who have exactly the same daily schedule. The reason students have unique schedules is that U.S. high schools offer a far wider choice of courses than secondary schools in other nations. Some courses are mandatory, including physical education, but many others ("electives") are selected by the students with the advice of their guidance counselors. To accommodate each student's selections, it is necessary for every student to change rooms between each daily class period. Teachers often change rooms, too. The four- to six-minute periods when everyone changes rooms can be noisy and disorderly.

In most schools, the students begin the day by reporting to a "homeroom" where attendance is taken and announcements are made. Then each student begins to follow his or her unique schedule, attending one 40- or 45-minute class after another. Few schools allow students to leave campus during their lunch periods. Some schools have a class period for extracurricular activities (discussed below), but in most schools these groups meet once or twice a week at the end of the school day. Athletic teams also practice at the end of the day.

Classroom Procedures: Each class period is preceded by the arrival of the students and, often, the teacher from some other part of the building. Sometimes the teacher begins with a short written quiz to see if the students have remembered what was taught the day before or have understood the reading assignment for homework. The teacher might discuss the homework assignment or collect it for grading. But often the teacher begins the day's lesson without delay.

For many teachers visiting from abroad, a major difference between their schools and U.S. schools is the amount of interaction between teacher and students during the lesson. Lecturing is infrequent in U.S. classrooms; dictation is rare. American educators believe that students learn better and faster when they are actively involved with the material they are learning. Students' involvement can take the form of speaking, writing, or doing group or individual projects of study or research. Students are expected to participate in class, but rarely by formally reciting material they have memorized. Teachers often ask questions of students in order to determine whether the students have understood the lesson or to coach them in analyzing facts and reaching a conclusion. Students are strongly encouraged to ask questions of the teacher during the lesson. They may be invited to offer opinions about issues being studied even if they disagree with the teacher.

In general, a high school classroom in the United States is a more lively, less solemn place than in many other parts of the world. It is widely believed in the U.S. that learning should be "fun" and that students won't learn much if the lesson is not interesting, relevant to their daily lives, and even enjoyable. American teachers devise many ways of giving their lesson these qualities. Occasionally they lead the students in learning games of various kinds. They use films, videotapes, and other audiovisual materials more often than teachers in most other nations.

As the class period nears its end, the teacher sometimes gives a homework assignment. Often the bell or buzzer signals that the class is over before the teacher finishes whatever he or she is saying. Students typically get up and leave the room without waiting for the teacher to finish. This seems very rude, but students argue that if they wait, they are in danger of being late for their next class.

Students in the U.S. often complain about the amount of homework they are asked to complete. They would find it hard to believe that they have less homework than students in most other countries. (Many U.S. students average only one to two hours of homework each night.)

Examinations and Marking: In the United States, students are given examinations (or "tests") quite frequently. Some, like the short quiz mentioned above, are for practice; often a teacher does not record quiz marks. Tests are given at the end of a unit of study and at the middle and end of a semester; during a year-long course, a student might have half a dozen major tests. Most tests are multiple choice or short answer. Essay questions are used to some extent in social studies, English, and other nontechnical courses.

No single examination, not even the final one at the end of the year, entirely determines a student's mark for the course. His or her marks on all major tests are taken into account. The student's study projects, such as term papers or laboratory experiments, are also considered. Finally, most U.S. teachers mark each student on class participation, and this mark also is taken into account when the student's final, overall mark for the year is determined.

Extracurricular Activities and Student Government: A way in which U.S. high schools differ from those in many other countries is that they offer a wide range of nonacademic activities for students. A school might have as many as 50 "extracurricular" (or "cocurricular") activities: publications, drama groups, marching bands and music ensembles, clubs for voluntary service, academic interest groups, hobby enthusiasts, debate teams, religious and political groups, and many others. Schools also offer a wide range of team sports such as baseball, football (American style), track and field, basketball, swimming, tennis, and others. The students in each year, such as the "juniors" in their eleventh year, typically raise funds and organize their own special events such as dances. Finally, all schools have some form of elected student government. Student representatives, often elected from each homeroom, rarely participate in any major way in administering the school. But they do have many opportunities to organize social events and lead their peers. This is thought to be good preparation for their roles as citizens of a local community after their graduation from the school.

Students are strongly encouraged to participate in extracurricular activities because it is widely believed that young people should be "well-rounded" (interested in many different things, not narrowly focused on only one or two things). Students voluntarily join as many extracurricular activities as they wish, according to their interests; some join none. Faculty participation is not voluntary; each faculty member must "sponsor" at least one extracurricular activity.

This responsibility can be enjoyable but may require a great deal of time; teachers with the most time-consuming sponsorships (such as coaching a major athletic team) receive extra pay.

Cultural Values Underlying School Life and Work Patterns: A very important value underlying daily life in the U.S. is individualism. Individualism is the belief that a person's well-being and personal interests are best looked after by himself or herself, and that each person should try to express his or her own personality and be as self-reliant as possible. Family and friendship groups do exist in the U.S., and people do cooperate with, care for, and seek advice from one another. Nevertheless, U.S. people are strongly individualistic.

A fine place to see individualism in daily life is in a U.S. high school. Each student is given dozens of extracurricular activities and dozens of courses from which to choose. Only a few courses are mandatory; no extracurricular activity is mandatory. Each student has a unique daily schedule. Each is expected to be personally involved in classes by asking questions and sharing opinions. Educational leaders frequently encourage teachers to develop "independent study" projects for students and to "individualize" classroom instruction. Students wear clothes of their own choosing (there are rarely uniforms in U.S. public schools, though many have "dress codes" setting minimum standards). They compete individually with peers for marks, top positions on athletic teams, and leadership posts in clubs and student government. Awards for excellence, given at the end of each school year, are almost all for individual students, not groups of students. In these ways, high schools in the United States help their students to think and behave according to the cultural value of individualism.

RELATIONSHIP PATTERNS WITHIN U.S. SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Relationships among Faculty and Administration: It is uncommon in the U.S. for a principal to run his or her school in a dictatorial manner. Principals and other administrators are expected to lead by being persuasive and by acting as "first among equals;" they try to have friendly relationships with their faculty members and, in most cases, are addressed by their first (given) name by teachers and other administrators. Although principals make some decisions on their own, they usually discuss major issues with faculty members individually and in groups. Some issues affecting the entire faculty are decided by means of open discussion and, finally, a democratic voting process.

The relationships between faculty members and the district board of education and its superintendent are not always so positive. Since the board of education sets salaries, conflicts may arise. Because it is elected by the citizens of the community, the board usually is not eager to raise teachers' salaries if that requires raising property taxes. Teachers sometimes go on strike to attempt to gain higher pay.

Relationships between Faculty and Students: Teachers from abroad frequently are surprised—sometimes shocked—by the apparent lack of respect shown by American students toward their teachers. It is not common for students to address their teachers by their first names, but, in general, teacher-student relationships are friendly and may include joking and teasing. Most teachers don't want to be viewed by students as heavy-handed authority figures or remote scholars.

In many other nations, the role of teachers is similar to the role of parents. They feel responsible for their students' moral and social development and try to help each student develop a strong character. Teachers in U.S. public schools rarely think they have such responsibility. They are helpful to students but avoid the parental role. Most parents agree that the role of teachers is to provide instruction and should not involve explicit moral training.

Relationships between Faculty and Parents: Some parents take a keen interest in the quality of instruction in the schools attended by their children. They join the school's parent-teacher association (PTA). They become acquainted with their children's teachers and come to the school whenever parents are invited to visit, which is likely to be three to five times a year. During these visits, parents frankly discuss the children and the classwork with the teachers. In some cases, teachers and parents are on a first-name basis. A few parents offer advice and even criticism to their children's teachers.

Many educators in the United States believe that children do much better in school if their parents form a cooperative relationship with the teachers. The relatively high rate at which U.S. students drop out of school prior to their graduation is often attributed, in part, to lack of parental involvement in what goes on in schools. (Another explanation for the high dropout rate is that the curriculum and the methods of teaching in most schools are not appropriate for students from non-mainstream cultural backgrounds such as American Indians, Hispanics, and black Americans. Twenty-five to forty percent of students from these "minority" groups drop out before graduating, while less than fifteen percent of students identified as "white" typically drop out.)

Cultural Values Underlying Relationship Patterns: Even though people in the U.S. recognize that others are above or below them in wealth, power, education, or other aspects of social status, they typically act as though just about everyone is of equal status. They do this by behaving informally. Informality pervades virtually every social situation, including social situations in U.S. secondary schools. Formal behavior rarely occurs in the United States.

Teachers and administrators recognize that their statuses are different. Students and teachers recognize their status differences, too. But they act informally toward one another in order not to emphasize those differences. So do teachers and parents, regardless of whether the teacher or the parent is higher in social status. The friendly, warm, informal manner that characterizes these relationships is not necessarily a sign of lack of respect. It is simply the way American people have learned to get along with each other.

THREE KEY ISSUES IN U.S. PUBLIC EDUCATION

Progressivism Versus Traditionalism: A debate has gone on for decades about the most effective ways to deal with the many kinds of students who attend school in the U.S. This debate involves complex issues. Two major points of view are traditionalism and progressivism.

Traditionalism, nowadays called "back to basics" (that is, a return to basic principles), views the fundamental purpose of education as developing and disciplining the minds of students. Traditionalists say that students should master subject matter in the major fields of knowledge, such as mathematics, science, and languages, so that they will leave school with solid intellectual skills that will enable them to be effective in a wide range of situations throughout their lives. Traditionalists do not approve of students' being able to select most of their courses. They want to require all students to take mostly academic courses that teach them how to use their minds and give them a solid grounding in general knowledge. Traditionalists believe that students should complete a great deal of academic work in school and that students with difficulties should be helped to improve.

Progressivism views the fundamental purpose of education as meeting the actual, practical needs of students after they leave the school. Progressive methods give students considerable freedom to follow their own interests in the classroom. Progressivists often describe their approaches as "child-centered." They point out that many students will not go on to attend college or university and have little interest in intellectual matters; therefore, there is no point in requiring all students to thoroughly master academic subjects. They also argue

that forcing all students to study academic subjects is elitist (anti-individualist and undemocratic) because some students will succeed while others are sure to fail. The curriculum should include subjects that are interesting and useful to all kinds of students—including the intellectual ones. Progressivists agree that all students should be able to read, write, and do arithmetic at some basic level. In general, however, they advocate that education be tailored to meet the abilities, needs, and preferences of the students, as viewed by the students.

Homogeneous Versus Heterogeneous Grouping: A second debate that has gone on for a long time concerns whether students who are alike should be grouped together for their classes ("homogeneous grouping," also known as "tracking"), or whether all students should be mixed together regardless of their characteristics ("heterogeneous grouping"). This debate has focused on two issues: (1) whether students from distinct ethnic and linguistic groups should be separated from or mixed with other students, and (2) whether students with higher academic ability should be separated from or mixed with students with lower academic ability. A variation of this second issue is whether students with mental, physical, and/or emotional handicaps should be mixed together (or "mainstreamed") with students who do not have such handicaps.

The first issue has been settled. The courts of the United States have ruled that students in public schools cannot be separated (or "segregated") by ethnic origin, native language, or other physical or cultural characteristics. The courts found that when students were segregated, some groups received a poor education while the others received a much better education. This difference in the quality of education meant that some students were not attaining their full potential in life. The courts ordered that segregation must cease.

The issue of separation of students according to academic ability continues to be discussed. Following are the two points of view.

Homogeneous grouping advocates argue that students with differing abilities should be taught separately so that teachers can better meet the needs of the members of each group. When students of different abilities are all mixed together, they say, fast learners become bored (because the lessons proceed too slowly for them) while slow learners become discouraged (because they can rarely understand everything going on in the classroom). Furthermore, the teacher's job in a mixed classroom can become impossible. Advocates of homogeneous grouping are especially concerned about the brightest students, who, they say, may not attain their full potential if forced to take academic classes with their less able peers. (Those who favor homogeneous grouping do not oppose mixing together students with many different abilities in non-academic courses such as physical education.)

Heterogeneous grouping advocates believe that when students are grouped by ability, feelings of superiority occur among those in the brightest groups while feelings of inferiority occur among those in the slowest groups. Drawing attention to people's differences in this way, they say, contradicts one of the key philosophical principles of the United States, that all people are fundamentally equal. They also argue that students with different abilities should be mixed together in most classrooms in order to insure that all Americans will be taught the same body of common knowledge. The less able students in these situations can be provided with individualized instruction by the teacher or another specially trained educator.

Local Versus State Financing of School Costs: Earlier, we saw that local boards of education have the power to tax the property (real estate) owned by local residents. Generally speaking, about 45 percent of the cost of operating local schools is raised from property taxes. Nearly 50 percent of the operating costs is provided by the state government; this money usually is distributed on the basis of the number of students in each local district. A little more than five percent is provided by the federal government; this money most often is for financing special programs of various kinds, such as those for students with particular handicaps.

As in most nations, some communities in the United States are populated mostly by wealthy people. Others are populated mostly by poor people. Taxes in wealthy communities raise more money for the schools, so children there almost always have a better education than children in poor communities. Many Americans believe this is unfair.

It is almost impossible to solve this problem at the local level because property taxes in poor communities cannot be high. So if more money is made available to boards of education in such communities, it must come from the state governments, where ultimate responsibility for education lies. Generally, however, state governments have not rushed to increase their contribution to local school districts.

In the summer of 1990, the state of New Jersey took a bold step to reduce the difference between wealthy and poor school districts. The state legislature raised taxes on people all across the state. It sharply reduced the aid it gives to the wealthiest school districts. It increased the aid it gives to the poorest school districts. New Jersey's action is a dramatic example of a slowly developing trend in the United States: less reliance on local property taxes to finance public education, and more reliance on state financial support to equalize the quality of education in all the state's school districts.

Cultural Values Underlying the Issues in Public Education: "Equal opportunity" expresses a value held dear by many Americans. Different people have different abilities, but all people are fundamentally of equal worth. So each individual should be equally provided with the skills and knowledge needed to make full use of his or her abilities. Education provides such skills and knowledge; therefore, a good education should be equally provided to all children. Fundamentally equal people should have an equal opportunity to use their abilities.

Each issue discussed above illustrates the desire of American educators to provide an equal opportunity for all children to attain their potential in life. Advocates of traditionalism and progressivism are both concerned about children's being well prepared to deal with life after they finish school. Segregation is being eliminated from American schools because the courts found that separate school facilities were always unequal. Advocates of heterogeneous and homogeneous grouping are arguing about the best way to provide an equally useful education for children of unequal abilities. And the slow trend towards more state financing of local school districts is occurring because it makes equal educational opportunity more likely.

SUMMARY:
IMPORTANT FEATURES OF SECONDARY EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

1. The national (federal) government of the United States has almost no responsibility for education. It does not administer schools.

2. The governments of the 50 states have responsibility for education but delegate much responsibility to local boards of education.

3. State boards of education set minimum standards for local boards of education. Only one state board (Hawaii) administers schools.

4. Local boards of education have a great deal of freedom to make decisions affecting local elementary and secondary education.

5. Both state and local boards of education are composed of leading citizens from all walks of life, not professional educators.

6. Each student in a U.S. high school is able to select many of his or her courses each year. Relatively few courses are required.

7. Each student has a unique schedule of classes each day. Students and many teachers individually change rooms many times each day.

8. There is much two-way interaction between teachers and students during classes. Students are expected to be actively involved by asking questions, carrying out projects, and even stating opinions.

9. Teachers rarely lecture for a long time and virtually never give dictations. Students infrequently are asked to memorize material.

10. Examinations and tests are given frequently. A student's mark for an entire course is an average of his or her marks for several tests, for special study projects, and for classroom participation.

11. Students are encouraged to join extracurricular activities and have dozens from which to choose. Teachers sponsor the activities.

12. School principals are expected to lead by being persuasive, not by acting dictatorially. Some matters are decided by faculty vote.

13. The relationship between teachers and students tends to be warm and friendly. Teachers do not act as parents toward students.

14. Parents are encouraged to take an interest in their children's school and to discuss their children's progress with the teachers.

15. The important American values of individualism, informality, and equal opportunity are strongly evident in U.S. secondary schools.

GLOSSARY:
COMMON TERMS IN SECONDARY EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

Coeducational: designates a school attended by both boys and girls. Almost all secondary schools in the U.S. today are coeducational.

Course: a topic of classroom instruction and study (including homework). In secondary schools, a course is completed when students have met with their teacher during one or two semesters for about 45 minutes on four or five days per week.

Credits: a number of points assigned to a course, often equal to the number of hours of class time per week during a semester. Graduation requirements specify, among other things, the number of credits that a student must earn during four years of high school.

Dress code: rules established by the school administration regarding the types of clothing that may and may not be worn to school by students. U.S. public schools rarely require the wearing of uniforms, but uniforms are common in parochial and some private schools.

Dropout: a student who leaves school without graduating from high school. In most states of the U.S., students must remain in school until they are 16 years old, but then they may drop out. The dropout problem is most severe in large urban areas.

Elective: a course that is not necessary for graduation, therefore being available for students to select or not select as they plan to attain their required number of credits.

Extracurricular activities: athletics, publications, student government, interest groups, social clubs, and other nonacademic activities available for student participation and enjoyment.

Freshman: a ninth grade student; a student in the first year of high school or in the final year of a junior high school (generally age 14).

Grade: (1) the year of study of any particular student or group of students; see, for example, "freshman" and "junior." (2) another word for "mark," that is, the percentage of correct answers on a test or the level of excellence achieved during an entire course.

Guidance counselor: a professional educator, usually trained in the field of psychology or social work, who provides advice and support (and, in some cases, discipline) to a group of students during the years that they are attending the school.

High school: in some local districts, a school housing grades ten through twelve; in others, a school housing grades nine through twelve. Historically called "senior high school."

Homeroom: a classroom where the same group of students meets each day, usually in the morning, to have their attendance recorded, to hear announcements, and sometimes to receive advice and guidance from their homeroom teacher.

Independent study: a course of study, or a unit of study within a course, in which a student is encouraged to complete a project or learn on his or her own, that is, without daily instruction by the teacher.

Junior: an eleventh grade student; a student in the third (next to last) year of high school (generally age 16).

Junior high school: a secondary school for younger students that includes grades seven through nine in some local districts, or grades six through eight in other local districts.

Mainstream: students who, in terms of ethnic and cultural background and academic abilities, are in the majority. "Mainstream" often applies to white, middle class students of average or above average intelligence and without any major handicap. When used as a verb, "to mainstream" means to put a minority or handicapped student in some or all of the same classes as majority students.

Middle school: a secondary school for younger students that includes grades five or six through eight; an alternative to junior high school.

Minorities: students who, in terms of ethnic and cultural background, are in the minority. Minority students include black Americans, Hispanic Americans (Spanish-speakers from the Caribbean or Central and South America), Asian Americans, American Indians, and many others.

Parent-teacher association (PTA.): an organization that meets from time to time to promote the interests of the school and its students; its members are teachers and parents.Sometimes called parent-teacher organization (PTO).

Parochial: designates a school supported and operated by a church or religious organization. For example, the Roman Catholic church operates thousands of parochial schools in the U.S., including elementary and secondary schools, colleges and universities.

Period: a time reserved for classroom instruction or other school-day activity (such as lunch), usually about 45 minutes in duration.

Private: designates a school supported and operated independently, without financial contributions from the government. Private (or "independent") schools are supported by the fees and tuition charges paid by students' parents, by philanthropic gifts, and by endowment income.

Public: designates a school supported and operated by the government. In the U.S., public schools are operated by local governmental bodies and supported by local, state, and federal government funds, which are raised from taxes of various kinds.

Semester: a period of study lasting half the school year, or approximately 4 1/2 months.

Senior: a twelfth grade student; a student in the fourth (last) year of high school (generally age 17).

Senior high school: *see* "high school."

Sophomore: a tenth grade student; a student in the second year of high school, which is often the first year of senior high school (generally age 15).

Sponsor: a faculty member who takes responsibility for overseeing the program of an extracurricular activity for students.

Tracking: another term for homogeneous grouping. "Track" or "tracking" suggests that students put into a certain kind of program (for example, one dealing with learning disabilities) during one year tend to remain in that program year after year, as though they were on a single railroad track with little or no opportunity to switch to another type of program.

Optional Paths Of Student Advancement Through The U.S. Educational System
(PRESCHOOL THROUGH SECONDARY EDUCATION)